



Using data to measure and map poverty and food insecurity in Northern Ireland

NIPDP Data Dialogue 2 – Summery Report

Published: November 2025

NIPDP Data Dialogue Summary Report:***‘Using data to measure and map poverty and food insecurity in Northern Ireland’.***

A ‘**Data Dialogue**’ is the **Northern Ireland Public Data Panel (NIPDP)** approach to deliberations on topics related to data use. Using a deliberative approach, panel members participate in discussion and activities to consider opinions and views on a given subject. With the support of facilitators, they collectively explore information they have been provided with, along with their own experiences and views related to address specific questions on the use of data for public good.

The Panel were introduced to the topics ‘**Using data to measure and map poverty and food insecurity in Northern Ireland**’ by two expert presenters. The first expert presenter introduced, the ‘**multidimensional aspect of poverty, the data landscape in Northern Ireland**’ and ‘**how administrative data is being used to study poverty around the world**’. The second expert presenter introduced the use of ‘**secondary data to map food poverty in Northern Ireland**’.

Throughout the presentations the Panel were encouraged to ask questions and to share their reflections, either verbally or via Post-it notes, which were annotated on flipcharts throughout the room. This included their initial thoughts and feelings around what was being shared, and any ideas about how they would like to see the data used.

The panel issues and points of interest raised, were documented and fed into the next stage of deliberation, a ‘**Knowledge Safari**’. An interactive deliberative method designed to arrive at common themes, statements, principles, and understanding.

Poverty is multidimensional, research on linked administrative data can help fully understand and address it. This includes use of data sources such as income, benefits, social care, health, education and others to better measure and map poverty in Northern Ireland for evidence-based policymaking and interventions.

Key points raised by the Panel

- A need to understand and defining, ‘absolute poverty’ versus ‘relative poverty’ and how these are used to demonstrate/communicate change to the public.
- A need for a collective effort to combat ‘poverty’ holistically. For example, different organisations working on poverty compounded by different ‘types’ i.e. fuel poverty, education poverty, digital poverty, etc splits the narrative. “When you keep using nouns in front of ‘poverty’ you’ll never get anywhere” (NIPDP member).
- A need to address silos of both data and policy and interventions around poverty. Members discussed the possibility of ‘People’s Minister’ or ‘Minister for Poverty’ which could have oversight and overview powers of collective efforts around poverty.
- A need to capture all our population to understand the problem. For example, from within government data sets and interaction with services – for example, those sleeping rough.
- An emphasis needed to use different types of knowledge available, beyond academic knowledge. This could include local community knowledge and the knowledge of lived experience.
- Panel members were broadly supportive of research using linked administrative data, underlining the importance of data being de-identified and accessible only in a safe setting. Something panellists felt was crucial to the acceptability of linked data research.

Tackling Food Insecurity

The consensus from the panel is that there is a requirement to shift from emergency responses to systemic, data-driven, and dignified support mechanisms that address root cause. These include collaborative, place-based solutions like social supermarkets and informed policymaking.

Key points raised by Panel

A 'Safety net' (social security benefits) should be the floor, not the ceiling (in response to the high numbers of people on benefits in absolute poverty) – people should not continue to be in 'absolute poverty' if they are receiving benefits.

Key points raised by Panel (continued)

- Panel members were very struck by the number of areas in Northern Ireland appearing as 'red' or 'orange' within the food insecurity map (i.e. areas with high food insecurity).
- Inquired about the potential overlay this data with supermarket food waste to address access to food; reduce food waste.
- Could a disadvantage to data-sharing be that some communities 'lose out' if the changes made are perceived by them to be negative?
- Would like to see the food insecurity data overlaid with other indices such as health.
- Emphasised importance of research being independent – concern that government may be influenced by political expediency or other political concerns.
- If the researcher accessing the data has one clear aim (poverty), this is preferable to government approaches, which Panel members felt was too siloed in its approaches to both data and policy and interventions around poverty.
- The Panel expressed the purpose of the research 'goes a long way' to determining whether they are comfortable with data use, or determining who they prefer to be accessing the data and conducting the analysis.

Knowledge Safari

Interactive deliberation by the panel to provide key insights in response to the following questions:

Knowledge Safari (continued)

Question 1: How do you feel about your data that relates to poverty being used by researchers to inform policy and practice?

Question 2: Do you have any concerns about using your data in this way?

Key Insights:

Panel members;

- Raised the importance of de-identifying data to protect personal information. Members were not supportive of identifiable data being used in these circumstances.
- Had a strong preference for knowing ‘who accesses’ the data and for ‘what purpose’. Access should be limited to approved individuals only.
- Highlighted the need for informed consent, where identifiable data is used in addition to an educational component to help individuals make informed choices about data sharing. An opt-out system was also suggested.
- Stated that clear communication was needed about the potential benefits and risks of data use.
- Indicated a positive attitude toward responsible data utilisation. There is a shared sentiment that not using the data to inform decisions and improve society would be more frustrating than its use.
- Felt that researchers should have access to de-identified data to investigate key issues like poverty.

Question 3: Are there some data sources you are more comfortable sharing than others?

- This is subject to individual perceptions, and the panel deliberated how sensitivities could be navigated. Topics that raise privacy concerns included family, mental health, education, relationship status, convictions, location, and occupation.

- An educational component was recommended to help individuals understand data use will and address concerns, as well as emphasising the de-identified nature of data being used in these examples.
- Offering incentives may increase willingness to share data, especially for more sensitive topics.

Question 4: Do you have a preference, for this research to be completed by academic or governmental researchers?

Key Insights:

Panel members;

- General preference is that research be led by academic institutions, valuing their perceived independence and objectivity.
- Generally stated that while government involvement is acceptable and necessary to enact policy or legislation based on research evidence, it should be supportive rather than directive. The research must remain free from political bias and independence must be protected alongside the publication of independent results. (“science not opinion”).
- Highlighted the ‘need for clarification on roles’, ‘clarification on what’ is meant by ‘government researchers’, specifically whether this refers to civil servants or other entities.
- Raised a need for a ‘collaborative model’ involving both ‘academia and government’ is seen as beneficial, provided that data security and research integrity are maintained.
- Felt that researchers should ensure the research is inclusive and representative.
- Had the assumption of a secure data environment, is critical to building trust in both academic and governmental research efforts.

Question 5: Are there other issues around food poverty or poverty generally you would like us to explore?

Key Insights:

The Panel members raised the following discussion points:

- Depression and poor mental health, can negatively influence dietary habits, creating a cycle of poor health outcomes.
- Shame and pride are significant barriers to seeking help. The stigma of poverty can prevent individuals from accessing support, even when needed.
- Concern about working individuals who still experience poverty and/or food poverty, highlighting gaps in support systems for those not traditionally seen as vulnerable.
- Need for better education especially for students on the relationship between diet and mental health, which is currently under-addressed.
- Social perceptions and assumptions about poverty can lead to isolation and reinforce negative stereotypes, worsening the experience of those affected.
- The term 'poverty' is viewed by some as emotive or unhelpful. There is a call for more accurate and less stigmatising language.
- Social isolation and lack of access to community resources are also critical dimensions that need attention.
- Limited access to green spaces is seen as a contributing factor to poor mental health and reduced quality of life for those in poverty.
- Debate over whether referrals for support should be voluntary or systematic, suggesting a need for clearer, more effective pathways to assistance.
- Panel emphasised the importance of timely feedback and review of support programs to ensure they are responsive and effective.

Conclusion

There is broad support for the use of data for linkage to research poverty. While there are some sensitivities within specific areas, the Panel generally felt that when data is de-identified and being accessed for a specific, transparent purpose which is beneficial to society, this was acceptable and even desirable. The Panel also expressed frustration at the amount of data being collected, held, and not used for research to improve our understanding of poverty and ultimately, improve people's lives. These discussions and findings should provide some confidence to data custodians, policymakers and researchers that, within certain conditions and in conversation with communities and people with lived experience, there is public support for linking administrative data for research on the subject of poverty.

This topic and its deliberation were brought to the panel by the Administrative Data Research Centre Northern Ireland (ADRCNI). The presenters were Dr Aideen Maguire, Queens University Belfast, and Dr Sinéad Fury Ulster University.